

Out-of-London Meeting, 2004 September 11–13

held at the Manx Museum, Douglas, Isle of Man

In 2004 the BAA travelled across the water to the Isle of Man for the annual Out-of-London weekend, which was held on the island for the first time. The Isle of Man Astronomical Society was celebrating its fifteenth anniversary, and it had been suggested that the BAA should be invited to hold a meeting on the island. The Society has more than a hundred members, many of whom are members of the BAA, and they were very pleased when it was learned that the offer had been accepted.

The weekend's activities were centred at the Manx Museum in Douglas, the island's capital. The museum is the headquarters of Manx National Heritage, and is equipped with a fine lecture theatre and other facilities. A public lecture on Friday evening was followed by a full day of lectures on Saturday and a visit to the IoMAS's observatory in the centre of the island on Sunday. About fifty BAA members journeyed to the island, and, with a similar number of locals, were treated to some outstanding talks.

On Friday evening, BAA members were welcomed with a champagne reception sponsored by CVI Technical Optics, a locally based company that specialises in precision lenses and coatings, and arranged through the company's General Manager, Dr Helmut Kessler – himself an enthusiastic member of the IoMAS. The gathering then moved to the lecture theatre, where the audience numbered about 120. The meeting was opened by Mike Kelly, Chairman of the IoMAS, and both he and Tom Boles, President of the BAA, welcomed the delegates.

Dr John Mason then presented the evening's lecture, entitled '*Cassini* at Saturn'. During this fascinating talk, Dr Mason discussed the outstanding results obtained

by the *Cassini* spacecraft, which had already returned many spectacular images of the planet, its rings and satellites, both as it approached Saturn and during and after orbital insertion around the planet. The speaker went on to describe the great hopes for the rest of the mission, and outlined the objectives of the *Huygens* probe, its impending descent through the atmosphere of Titan, and the prospect of our first views of the surface of this enigmatic world.

On Saturday morning Dr Stewart Moore, Director of the BAA Deep Sky Section, presented the first talk of the day, entitled 'Planetary Nebulae'. There is still much to learn about these fascinating objects, and the lecturer provided a valuable insight into the processes and current thinking about their origin and formation. Some of the images – especially those obtained by the Hubble Space Telescope – are spectacular. However, Dr Moore is an experienced visual observer of deep-sky objects, and he also discussed how they can best be observed by amateurs, and what results can be obtained.

Following a break for refreshments, Professor Michael Bode presented a lecture entitled 'The Liverpool Telescope', providing an update on the new facilities operated on the Canary Islands by Liverpool John Moores University. The outstanding success of this remotely operated instrument will inspire many new and older astronomers alike, and there is great potential for the networked Liverpool and Faulkes instruments.

The next lecture was presented by Bob Marriott, Director of the BAA Instruments and Imaging Section and Curator of Instruments, who spoke on 'Esoteric Optics'. After a brief résumé of the early work of Alhazen, Bacon, Lipperhey, Kepler and Newton, the speaker discussed many less familiar instruments designed (but not always produced) during the period since the mid-eighteenth century. These included fluid lenses, dialytes, trischiefspiegler, heliostats, siderostats, coelostats, Ritchey–Chrétien and Dall–Kirkham systems, Schmidt cameras and derivatives, spectroscopic equipment, peripheral devices such as the extinction photom-

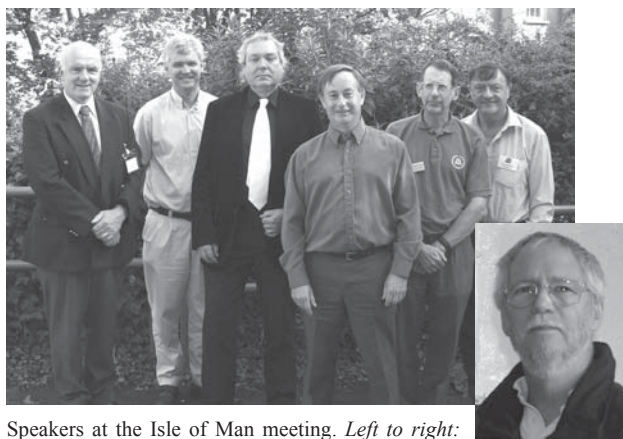
eter and the diploidoscope, instruments specifically designed for space navigation during *Apollo* lunar missions, and many other devices by which light can be manipulated, some of which have incorporated very unusual materials and bizarre mounts. Mr Marriott concluded his talk by quoting Tony Hancock (*via* Galton and Simpson): 'Daft idiotic things, mirrors. Why can't they reflect things properly?'

The afternoon session began with a talk entitled 'Astronomy from Mann', presented by Howard Parkin, who was due to take over as Chairman of the IoMAS the following week. Over many years Mr Parkin has sought out historical records and information linking astronomy with the Isle of Man, and during his talk he detailed many of these links. Some of them reveal famous names: for example, Isaac Newton, who took over the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge from Isaac Barrow, whose uncle was Bishop and Governor of the island. Mr Parkin said that only the previous evening, during a conversation with Anthony Kinder (BAA Librarian and Director of the Historical Section), he had discovered that an earlier (but defunct) Manx Astronomical Society had had as one of its members a Thomas Keig, who in 1890 was a founder member of the BAA. The discovery and compilation of these local associations and links might possibly inspire others to take up similar research in their own areas of the country. Mr Parkin then presented a brief history of the IoMAS, and described the building of the Society's observatory at Foxdale.

The next lecture of the afternoon was 'Comets of 2004', presented by Jonathan Shanklin, Director of the BAA Comet Section. Dr Shanklin's presentation included the announcement of the discovery of a new comet which had been confirmed that morning. Some excellent photographs accompanied the talk, and the speaker concluded by presenting an insight into NASA's impending *Deep Impact* mission, which will rendezvous with Comet 9P Tempel in 2005 July.

The last lecture was presented by Prof Don Kurtz, of the Centre for Astrophysics at the University of Central Lancashire. Entitled 'The Songs of the Stars', it provided a fascinating insight into the perhaps unfamiliar field of astroseismology. The lecture not only included many illustrations and images, but also, rather unusually, several audio clips revealing the 'sounds' that stars emit during their turbulent and active lives.

On Sunday morning many of the delegates took the opportunity to travel the few miles



Speakers at the Isle of Man meeting. *Left to right:* Howard Parkin, Prof Mike Bode, Bob Marriott, Stewart Moore, Jonathan Shanklin, Tom Boles. *Inset:* Prof Don Kurtz.

to Foxdale to see the IoMAS's observatory, which houses a recently installed 16-inch Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope. This observatory – which was built in 2000 – is large enough to house a telescope of up to 1 metre aperture, and also has a club-room, a kitchen and other facilities. Also on display was the recently acquired 28-inch mirror, which will be incorporated in a new telescope to replace the 16-inch, which will be installed in an adjacent smaller observatory (yet to be built).

The President of the BAA, Tom Boles, thanked the members of the IoMAS for all their efforts in arranging an excellent weekend. He and all the visitors were very impressed with the Society's facilities. Mike Kelly, the retiring Chairman of the Society, then responded with his thanks on behalf of the local members, and expressed the hope that many of the visitors would soon return.

A number of visitors then travelled to Peel to see the 'Mann in Space' exhibition (opened in July 2004) at the House of Manxman. This exhibition – arranged by Manx National



At the IoMAS observatory (right), a display showed details of the construction of the facility. Below: BAA visitors and members of the IoMAS inside the observatory dome. (All photos: Hazel McGee)



Heritage – celebrates the island's history from the period of the Vikings to the Space Age, and commemorates the 1,025th anniversary of Tynwald (the island's parliament) and the 35th anniversary of the first manned landing on the Moon. The exhibition includes a sample of lunar rock from the *Apollo 15* mission, and also features the IoMAS.

For some, the weekend ended with a leisurely drive around the island; and those who returned to the mainland on the ferry during the dark early hours of Monday morning were treated to an exhilarating three-hour voyage in a force 9 gale.

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